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MONEY BREEDS GREED; DICKENS' *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND*

by
Patricia E. McDaniel

The mid-19th century was a prosperous time for Victorian England. Accompanying the rise of industry was the rapid rise of the middle class, which had to learn to cope with their new-found monetary and material gains in a predominantly evangelical era. The trials and triumphs of this newly industrialized society were sources of a great deal of humor and pathos for Victorian readers, as revealed by Dickens in his last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*. In particular, Dickens criticizes Victorian morality by satirizing Victorians' avariciousness in their money-dominated society.

Our Mutual Friend has one main plot and many subplots. While this is a typical literary technique of his era, Dickens uses these plots to echo one another. All of the plots pit money against people. In fact, the dominant backdrop for these plots is Mr. Boffin's dust heap, a backdrop that, according to the critic J. Hillis Miller, represents more than inherited wealth, but also the attribution of value to what is itself without value, such as paper, gold, dust and earth (1). Such images all equate money with dirt and immorality. Furthermore, the quest for money by picking through refuse pervades the novel.

Dickens satirizes all Victorians, regardless of their class, in order to stress the interconnectedness of society and the interweaving of monetary motives. He establishes this avarice motif early in the work. In the opening scene, for instance, two lower class characters, Gaffer Hexam and his daughter Lizzie, scavenge the Thames in the dark for corpses to rob. Unlike his daughter, Gaffer believes that it is not a crime to take money from a dead man; instead he argues:

Has a dead man any use for money? Is it possible for a dead man to have money? What world does a dead man belong to? This world. How can money be a corpse's? Can a corpse own it, want it, spend it, claim it, miss it? (47)¹

Certainly Gaffer's greed knows no moral limits. As long as he makes money he will be satisfied with his grisly occupation and will provide rhetorical rationalizations in praise of it. Herein lies an astutely satiric social comment, for Gaffer's livelihood comes from death.

¹ This passage and all quoted material are from Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, Penguin Books, 1983.

Similarly, Dickens uses the Veneerings and their social gatherings as one way of satirizing the upper class. They give dinner parties, for instance, simply to show off their wealth. The Veneerings, whose name implies their superficial importance, are pretentious and shallow people.

Mr. and Mrs. Veneering were bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London. Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span new. All their furniture was new, all their servants were new,...they themselves were new,...And what was observable in the furniture, was observable in the Veneerings — the surface smelt a little too much of the workshop and was a trifle sticky (48).

It is their caricaturized shallowness which makes the Veneerings and their party guests so comical.

One such guest at the Veneering's dinner party is Lady Tippins. While she may be an aristocratic lady according to the social register, she is in no way a true aristocrat. Instead, Lady Tippins is gluttony personified. Her greedy need not only for food, but for lovers is immeasurable. Once described, Lady Tippins is instantly recognizable as the large, boastful woman who in reality has nothing to boast about. Dickens says of her,

She is always attended by a lover or two, and she keeps a little list of her lovers, and she is always booking a new lover, or putting a lover on her black list, or promoting a lover to her blue list, or adding up her lovers, or otherwise posting her book (54).

One might wonder if Lady Tippins has any lovers at all, or if she is simply a methodical person who likes to keep lists, another manifestation, perhaps, of her gluttony.

Another comical side to Lady Tippins is her eating habits. It is here we see her gluttonous nature most literally. "Notably Lady Tippins has made a series of experiments on her digestive functions, so extremely complicated and daring, that if they could be published with their results it might benefit the human race" (53). In this passage the name "Lady" Tippins alone sounds superficial and comical. Dickens employs this comic style to show that what is traditionally associated with the strict morals of Victorian society is not altogether true, and that many Victorians are hypocritical in their views.

Furthermore, Dickens demonstrates the power that money has to shape and corrupt lives. Money is the main motivating force for all the characters, regardless of their social status. Greed motivates Silas Wegg and Rogue Riderhood, two characters from the bottom of society, who plot to blackmail the wealthy Mr. Boffin. Money impels upper class characters like the Veneerings and Podsnaps as well. Many of the characters, in their insatiable desire to acquire money, fail to realize that money has come from dust,

and that they have simply ascribed value to valueless matter.

Similarly, the characters do not value one another on the basis of who they are as individuals, but rather, for the amount of money each possesses. The wealthy Veneerings, for instance, are morally shallow people, but Victorian society nevertheless holds them in high esteem. Perhaps the most satiric example of false notoriety, however, is exemplified in Mr. Podsnap. Not only does society wrongly respect him because of his wealth, but his wealth is the single most important reason why he holds himself in such high esteem.

Mr. Podsnap was well to do, and stood very high in Mr. Podsnap's opinion. Beginning with a good inheritance, he had married a good inheritance, and had thriven exceedingly in the Marine Insurance way, and was not quite satisfied, and he felt conscious that he set a brilliant social example in being particularly well satisfied with most things, and, above all other things, with himself (174).

In addition, Mr. Podsnap's superficiality is underscored by his greed and lust for power. In his ruthless quest for wealth, he disregards those who helped him attain it.

There was a dignified conclusiveness — not to add a grand convenience — in this way of getting rid of disagreeables which had done much towards establishing Mr. Podsnap in his lofty place in Mr. Podsnap's satisfaction. 'I don't want to know about it; I don't choose to discuss it; I don't want to admit it!' Mr. Podsnap had even acquired a peculiar flourish of his right arm in often clearing the world of its most difficult problems by sweeping them behind him (and consequently sheer away) (174).

Indeed, Mr. Podsnap's inability to cope with wealth typifies the problem many Victorians had when propelled from poverty into the middle class by the Industrial Revolution. Dickens so wittily terms this abrupt transition, and all that the immoral Mr. Podsnap represents, as "Podsnappery." Money plays such an important role that at one point Dickens even personifies it, describing it as,

Hanging on every bush, flutters on every tree, [it] is caught flying by electric wires, haunts every enclosure, drinks at every pump, cowers at every grating, shudders upon every plot of grass, seeks rest in vain behind the legions of iron rails (191).

This negative image of money haunting, cowering, shuddering and vainly seeking rest suggests Dickens' negative attitude towards the rampant materialism among his countrymen in their smug Victorian world.

But perhaps Dickens best illustrates how money plays a significant role in shaping peoples' lives with the Bella Wilfer plot. Mercenary in her ways, Bella believes she is eligible for a finer man than Rokesmith because of her new found position with the wealthy Boffins. She changes her views, however, once she sees how wealth corrupts Mr. Boffin from a friendly old man to an avaricious miser. It is Mr. Boffin's transformation which causes Bella to realize that money changes people for the worse; therefore, she decides that she would rather live without the comforts and luxuries that wealth brings. As a result, she returns to live in her father's frugal home.

She decides, too, that she can only marry a man whom she loves, rather than a man who could provide her with a fortune; consequently, she marries Rokesmith. They live happily married, in modest comfort. Once Rokesmith's real identity is revealed, however, Mr. Boffin gives Harmon (Rokesmith) the estate which is rightly his. Fortunately for her, Bella managed to learn her lesson and still become a wealthy woman; thus, ironically, Dickens rewards this heroine monetarily even though he condemns materialism. The fact, too, that Mr. Boffin feigned miserliness to teach Bella a lesson about money's power to corrupt, underscores another important theme in the novel; that is, that vices must be punished and virtues must be rewarded. This is not only a moral theme of the novel, but of the Victorian age as well.

Indeed, Mr. Boffin's cunning transformation compels Bella to denounce the greed and immorality that often accompany wealth. Like Thomas Carlyle's philosophy of the "Paradox of Man," which states that man's unhappiness comes from his greatness; that there is an infinite in him which with all his cunning he cannot quite bury under the finite, Bella also understands that in all her avariciousness, she could never be happy, because the more she had the more she would want. Thus, in his satirization of morality in this historical era, Dickens reveals to his readers the need to temper desires. There lies the moral.

SOURCES CITED

- Dickens, Charles. *Our Mutual Friend*. Penguin Books, 1983.
 Miller, J. Hillis. *Dickens — A Collection of Critical Essays*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1967.